CARE, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

September 17, 1989, 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Romans 13:8-10
Luke 10:25-37

"But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion,..." --Luke 10:33 (RSV)

There was something about his voice. It came through the intercom urgently, painfully. When you work in a city church you hear, before very long, every conceivable story created, rehearsed, told and retold in order to separate you from a few dollars. I have wondered at times about the general health of the people in Tennessee - because every day someone asks us for money in order to buy a bus ticket to visit a mother who is critically ill in Nashville. And so one devises some criteria to separate the wheat from the chaff. One learns to inhale deeply and recognize the distinct and telltale smell of alcohol. And we devise ways to separate real from fabricated human need. Meal ticket vouchers, food and clothing instead of cash is one way to make sure one's charity is not ending up in the cash register of a local liquor store. But even that can be tricky if what you give is in any way marketable. And so, in the process of protecting our charity, being responsible with our resources, assuring that our caring is deserved, something sometimes gets lost.

This voice penetrated my own defense perimeters. I went to the door and saw a young man in torn and dirty clothing; his face was bruised and puffy, and he was shivering. It was not particularly cold. He did not ask for money or food. All he wanted was a sweater so he could stop shivering. So I did what we all know we should do under those circumstances: I referred him to the Social Service Center around the corner and returned to the U.S. Open on television. Just as I sat back down I recalled two things: One, it was 5:30. The Social Service Center closes at 5:00 on Saturday; and two, a wedding was about to begin in Blair Chapel. So I hurried over to the church and sure enough, there he was - standing at the Chestnut Street door, the one that is locked, pounding, trying to look through the windows - and inside there were people in tuxedos and lovely dresses, engaged in a very important and very happy religious ceremony.

The church staff was caught between the two events: The lovely wedding about to begin and the man standing outside the door, with his face all puffy and bruised, shivering, wanting a sweater. The resolution was simple enough. The receptionist, who, by the way, deals with emergencies like this all day long, and I went down to the Share Shop, found a sweater

and a wool sport coat; I took it up to the man and gave it to him. He was overjoyed: put them both on, thanked me profusely and walked up Chestnut Street.

As I watched him make his way through the small tables outside Crickets, full of people enjoying a late afternoon drink, I recalled a Mark Twain vignette. Twain is reported to have said once that he was not much bothered by what he couldn't understand about the Bible. He was bothered a lot, he said, by what he understood quite clearly. I was bothered by the fact that looming directly ahead, like a Biblical sword of Damocles, was the text I had chosen months ago to use on Sunday, September 17. It wasn't guilt, actually. It was a sense of irony. The church can't interrupt a wedding every time a homeless person or an addict or a drunk looking for some guilt-ridden, middle class bleeding heart to finance another bottle of cheap wine pounds on the door. Nor can I - nor should you - play savior to every person with a hand out on Michigan Avenue, not to mention the 10 or 50 thousand homeless people on the streets, depending on whose numbers you believe, not to mention millions of hungry people in the country and world. So I watched him walk away from the church - where the processional had now begun - with his discarded wool sweater and sport coat, threading his way through the cocktail crowd at Crickets, still shivering by the way, and I found myself full of compassion, or at least appreciation for the priest in the story Jesus told, who did not even stop to investigate the naked, beaten body of a man lying beside the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The sweater and coat, I concluded, was simply a socially acceptable way of "passing by on the other side" of the road in St. Luke's memorable imagery.

But before we get to that, please remember why Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan in the first place. A lawyer caught up with him one day and asked: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Now this whole incident is so brilliantly crafted that you can build a lot of theological structure on every single sentence. You can, for instance, point out the anomaly of the lawyer's question. He knew and Jesus knew and we know that you can't do a thing to inherit... except be nice to your wealthy relatives and try not to look too eager or attentive when they get sick. Inheritance of property, money, or eternal life, it would seem, is in someone else's hands. I'm not going to build this sermon on that anomaly but I would like for us to recall that it is the question the story of the Good Samaritan answers - sort of.

In any event, if you can get past the incongruity, it's a good question. We are inclined to use the term "eternal life" to describe what we hope will happen to us after we die. Jesus and the Jewish people he was addressing used the phrase to describe a new quality of life in the present. "Eternal life" indicated a new dimension of life now. So translate what the lawyer asked: not "how can I get to heaven when I die?" but "what can I do to be fully alive now?"

As a matter of fact the lawyer knew the answer. He was probably wearing it in the phylactery dangling from his wrist. For generations the Rabbis had condensed the entire religious law into the famous summary "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind...and your neighbor as yourself." "Do it" said Jesus..."and you will live." Don't sit around discussing it, analyzing it, emoting over it, evaluating and

prioritizing it: just do it. Love God and your neighbor...and you will be living.

What would the New Testament do without lawyers? This one doesn't let us down, but in a kind of reflective attempt to keep the inquiry going tries to extend or confuse the matter by asking: "Who is my neighbor? I'll love him if I could only know which one he is." The lawyer knew and Jesus knew that there was serious discussion about this matter. At its best and most inclusive Judaism, in the tradition of Amos, Hosea, Jonah, defined neighbor as "fellow human being." At its narrowest and most exclusive, Judaism defined neighbor as kin, friend, fellow citizen. Charity begins at home, after all. One of the anthropological functions of religion is to help us define who we are by defining who we are not. Tribalism is the name for it: Moslem and Jew - in the Middle East, Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland. "Take care of our own: let them tend to theirs." Religion helps tell us who "they" are.

So Jesus told a story. A man is walking down the 17 mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is mugged; robbed, beaten, stripped of all his clothes, and left to die, naked and alone, by the side of the road. Along comes a priest. He has probably been on duty in Jerusalem. It's a business trip. He's on his way home to do more official duties. He's riding a donkey. Priests don't walk. He sees the naked, beaten body and steers the donkey to the other side of the road. Why did he do that? Ever know a human being who wasn't at least curious? Why not at least ride by and peer down and see? The reason is that if that naked body was a gentile, and without clothes on, the priest couldn't really tell what nationality or religion that man was: worse yet, if, that body was dead and the priest came within four cubits (six feet) of it, the priest would be unclean and could not function as priest until he turned around, went back to Jerusalem, to sign up for the week-long ritual of purification, bought a red heifer, slaughtered it and burnt it to ashes. His wife - quips Kenneth Bailey, a Mid-Eastern scholar who explains the incredibly complex dynamics of this story - would have been glad he had the good sense not to stop and get involved. It's nothing personal with him. He is actually caught in an untenable conflict between his personal conscience and whatever feeling he has about the man in the ditch, and the religious system he serves which has other duties for him to perform. **The wedding consultant can't stop the ceremony, so the clergy can run outside and deal with the man pounding on the church door.**

A Levite comes along next; he's a minor religious official. He does what the priest did. Then comes the Samaritan. Only someone who has lived in a culture divided by a couple of centuries of racial and religious hatred can comprehend the contempt Jews (the ones hearing this story) felt toward Samaritans, says Bailey. Never, never, he says, would a Palestinian tell a story in which an Israeli is hero. Never would an Israeli tell a story in which a member of the PLO comes out a moral hero, superior in fact to an Orthodox Rabbi. So it is a very dramatic and disturbing story because the Samaritan does everything the Priest and Levite do not do. He stops, kneels down, tends to the wounds, puts the limp body on his donkey, hauls it all the way down to Jericho, registers the man in an inn, pays the bill and promises to come back later and settle his account.

"Who is neighbor?" This Samaritan obviously. The one who showed mercy. The one who, in Jesus' words "had compassion." Now we have the full answer to the original question: "What shall I do to be fully alive?" Have compassion: Be compassionate: Care.

Compassion is the key. It is a very strong word by the way. It does not mean pity or sentimentality. It has a lot to do with passion. It's linguistic roots in both Greek and Hebrew have to do with "innards." Compassion is literally a "gut feeling" - a visceral response. Jesus was teaching that to feel deeply and passionately, specifically to feel with a human being in need, is very close to what it means to be alive. Conversely, he was teaching that not to feel deeply, not to have compassion is to be not quite alive - dead.

There is a specific word here. The tilt of urban life is in the other direction. There is so very much to care about we find ourselves building barriers, defense mechanisms, to keep the suffering of others out. Compassion survives in small communities where everyone knows everyone else: where neighbors are friends and friends are neighbors. When one suffers down the street, all the neighbors rally round and bring noodle casseroles and apple pies. But in the city, it is possible to live in an apartment for a very long time without even meeting the people who live on either side.

The very size of urban problems is intimidating. Did you happen to see Joan Beck's editorial on homelessness in the Chicago Tribune last Saturday? It is not a simple matter. She cited a new study done in Baltimore and just published in the Journal of the American Medical Society which painfully described the complicated cluster of problems and how they are related in a way that exacerbates every one of them.

91% of the homeless men interviewed and 80% of the women had either an alcohol or drug addiction, or a major mental illness, or both.

The men suffered an average of 8.3 health disorders, the women 9.2.

70% had dental problems: 50% had cardiovascular difficulties.

A third are anemic. Almost all suffer malnutrition and become further ill without nourishing food, medical care, decent sanitation, or access to clean, warm and safe shelter.

Almost all are lonely, cut off from meaningful contact except with other sick, homeless people.

And so it is not simple. Solutions come in clusters too and they are all expensive, tedious and demanding. "Tax dollars are short" said the editorial. "But the cost of not trying, of continuing to avert our eyes from the homeless or to hand out an inadequate dollar or two is even greater - and that is a hardened heart." [Chicago Tribune, 9/11/89]

Hunger, illiteracy, drug traffic, unemployment are complex problems which not only exist but are worsening in our city. They demand the very best thinking and the most efficient organizations we can produce. And

while we are trying to do that - to create systems to deal with systemic suffering - someone has to keep reminding us that hunger is measured not only by average nutritional levels but by a little child who hasn't eaten for two days: and that unemployment is not just a percentage statistic but a forty year old whose world just crumbled because his job was abolished: and poverty is a particular mother whose apartment rent and utility bill absorb 90% of her welfare check: and illiteracy is not just the inability to read Shakespeare but also the directions on food packages and instruction on job applications.

Someone has to hold on for dear life to the capacity for compassion. Someone must risk the cynicism of those for whom "do-gooder" is a criticism. Someone must remind the world that to be unfeeling, emotionally anesthetized from the suffering of others, while safe, is synonymous with being spiritually dead.

Joe Sittler was always quoting passages of Joseph Conrad to his theology students. He thought Conrad was a novelist who knew this teaching of Jesus thoroughly. In Typhoon, a ship captain, on the China Sea, is sitting in his cabin watching the barometer fall and the sea become violent as his crew below is being tossed about by the cruel storm. Conrad said and Sittler wanted us to know:

"Captain MacWhirr had sailed over the surface of the oceans as some men go skimming over the years of existence to sink gently into a placid grave, ignorant of life to the last, without ever having been made to see all it may contain of perfidy, of violence, of terror. There are on sea and land such men thus fortunate - or thus disdained by destiny or by the sea." [The Ecology of Faith, p. 53]

Jesus said if you cannot feel the suffering of others you are not fully alive. And Dr. Bernie Siegel, in his popular book Love, Medicine and Miracles, writes about a terribly ill patient: "Death is not the worst thing. Life without love is far worse." [p. 207]

It is, I think, the Christian secret. Eternal life is given to us as we open ourselves to others: as we take upon ourselves the pain and suffering of others: as we love and serve and help and strive to bind up wounds. It is our secret and it is a radically different word from the way the world proposes that we should live. Philosopher Sam Keen describes our culture's definition of the full and good life as "a new car, a color TV,... a perimeter of ICBMs surrounding all 'hostile nations'; a large insurance policy, knowing your underarm deodorant will keep you spring-time fresh throughout the day: being well-liked, having a good job." [The Passionate Life, p. 102]

The Christian secret is that real life, life with the quality of eternity to it - full, joyful, satisfyingly human life - happens when it is given away in compassionate love for somebody else.

The world needs that secret. The world needs people who know that secret, people willing to be out of step at times, people willing to love and care when it is not terribly appropriate or convenient or socially acceptable. The world needs a church courageous enough to tell the truth:

to say, for instance, that we have made the problem of homelessness much worse by cutting huge holes in the safety net in order to give ourselves tax breaks, and we're about to do it again. There are more people on the street because there are fewer places for them to live. And there are fewer places because we decided to stop using government funds (our funds) to build them. The world needs an institution willing to keep saying that. The Good Samaritan, someone pointed out, would have been less than faithful if the incident beside the road happened every day. At some point he should harness his compassion to his intelligence and show up at City Council to inquire about conditions on the road. But, in the meantime, the city also needs churches willing to bind up wounds - willing to answer the door in the middle of the wedding, willing to advocate the cause of anyone lying beside the road.

The conclusion: be compassionate: Care, for Christ's Sake: be alive by being vulnerable to the suffering of others. That is how sermons on this parable end. That is what our Lord said to that lawyer. And insofar as we identify with him, that is the word of Jesus Christ to us and for us.

But something happened to me this time through this very familiar material. In the course of a 25 year ministry one does preach on this text more than once. And this time something new occurred. This time through I found that I was identifying not only with the two men who passed by on the other side and with the Samaritan who had compassion, this time I found myself thinking about the victim. He may be the main character. It may be that the people Jesus was talking to would have first identified with him.

It may be that we are to hear two words here: a word of admonition to be alive by caring. But also a word of God's compassion to us - for us, wherever we are.

Said Karl Barth: "The Good Samaritan is not far from the lawyer. He stands before him incarnate..."

Jesus is the Good Samaritan. He is the one who comes onto the road of life. He is the one who will not pass by when we are alone. When life falls in, when we are bruised, battered, wounded: when it is clear that we are alone: there is one who will not and does not pass by. There is one who promises to kneel by the roadside to bind up our wounds, to love us back to life.

So it is more than an admonition. It is Gospel.

"'All loving' someone said is ultimately 'thanksgiving' for the fact that we ourselves have been loved." [Helmut Thielicke, The Waiting Father, p. 168]

Jesus Christ calls you, and me to love the neighbor in need, the one nobody else ever notices, not as duty, but in the gratitude of love. And in the promise that when we do that, when we care for Christ's sake, in loving that man - that woman - that child - we will be given the gift of life.

Amen.